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Building Coalitions That Work

Organizing—and winning—across race and class lines

This article was published in longer form in the July/August 1985 issue of the RESIST Newsletter. While the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice is no longer in existence, the article's author, Anne Braden, presents ideas around building coalitions that are relevant for our organizing work today. Anne Braden was a critical figure in the justice and peace movements of the South for more than five decades, until her death in 2006.

By Anne Braden

Tenants who live in public housing in Marrero, Louisiana marched a hundred strong across the Greater New Orleans Bridge to the office of the Department of Housing & Urban Development in New Orleans a few months ago.

Joined by tenants from all along the Gulf Coast, they presented to federal officials a list of demands: an end to illegally high rents, repairs to long-neglected housing units, the right to run the housing developments they live in and a massive housing construction program to meet the needs of thousands of people on waiting lists for public housing in their communities and across the nation.

The banner they carried as they came across the bridge said: "March for Housing and Peace." A reporter asked the marchers, "How are housing and peace related?"

Rose Mary Smith of the Marrero Tenant Organization replied, "What we are saying is that poor tenants in public housing cannot have repairs made to our homes or enough public housing built as long as our government throws away billions of dollars on war."

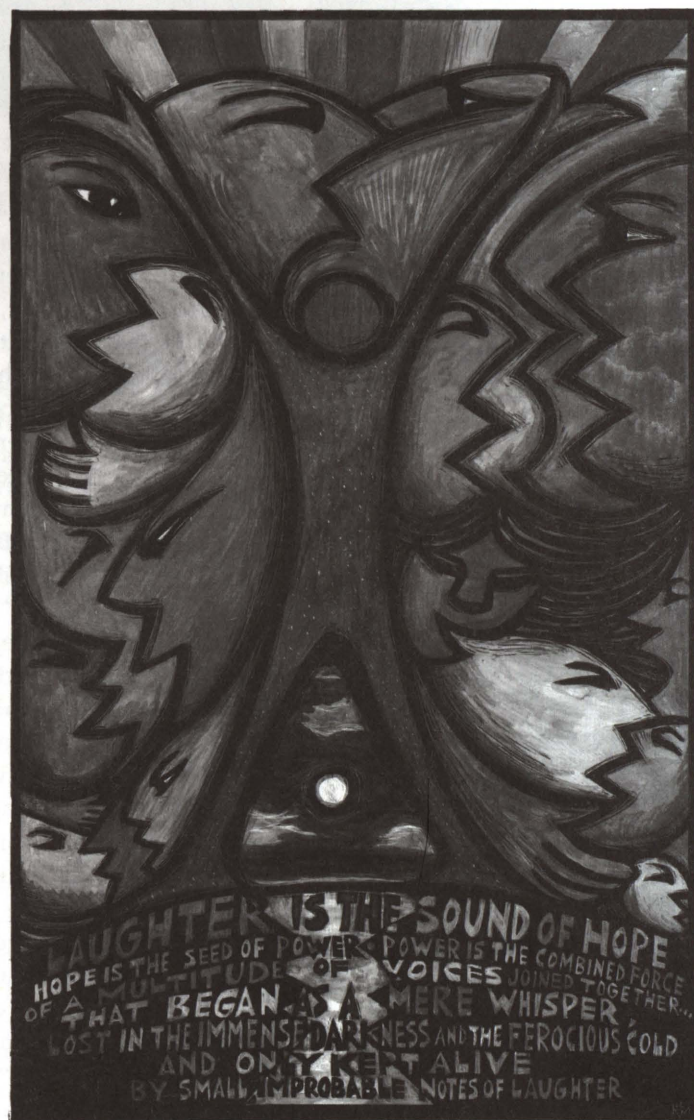
That march—and other recent militant actions—are visible expressions of

a new grassroots movement that has developed along the Gulf Coast of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama since early 1983. It has been organized by people who live in public and federally subsidized housing—mostly women, mostly Black, although white tenants have also begun to join. Most of the leaders are people who were never before active in social justice efforts.

These activists have taken on formidable foes: insensitive housing managers, local politicians and the federal government itself. And they've been winning victories.

Making the connections

The movement has also made history by dramatically linking local and global issues. The Gulf Coast tenants have launched a petition drive calling on the



"Laughter" by Ricardo Levins Morales, www.rlmarts.com

federal government to build 10 million new low-rent housing units in the next

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Alliance Building in Louisville

Kentucky Alliance continues to prioritize anti-racist action across race lines

By Tom Moffett

Blacks and whites working actively together is unfortunately still unusual today, but it was truly difficult 35 years ago when the Kentucky Alliance Against Racist & Political Repression came together in the heart of Louisville's Black West End.

One of the first chapters in a national group formed by many organizers, including longtime political activist and former Black Panther Angela Davis and southern, white anti-racist organizers Anne and Carl Braden, its purpose was to build resistance to the attacks that were occurring in the early 1970s on activists in the African-American civil rights community and other social justice movements.

From the beginning, the Kentucky Alliance, a stand-alone organization for many years now, accepted the critical importance of true power sharing between African Americans and whites in mem-

bership and leadership. In our society that seldom happens without serious effort and constant attention.

History of organizing

The few strong individuals who answered the call from Anne and Carl may have gotten some help from Louisville's history as a city with one of the nation's largest communities of free Blacks during the years before the Civil War. Years of effective African-American political action paved the way for strong relationships to develop between African-American organizers and progressive whites.

In spite of that history, Louisville in the early 1970s was becoming rapidly more segregated, and the imminence of court-ordered busing began causing truly riotous and violent behavior in white crowds of up to 1,000 people.

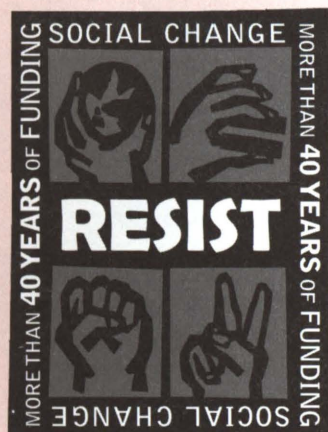
In that tense setting Bob Cunningham became the first chairperson of the Alliance. He carries strong memories of those first meetings working to organize a true partnership of Blacks and whites for visible action.

"Due to the national attention that Louisville had received from the violent white opposition to school desegregation, fair-minded and progressive Blacks and whites were shocked and embarrassed. They felt the need for a coming together of the races," remembers Bob, who still serves on the Alliance's Board of Directors.

"The fact that Anne Braden, a well-known white social justice activist, still resided within the Black community in spite of repeated Klan threats and violence was a critical

trust factor for both sides," Bob continues. "She had always called for racial unity and backed her words with ac-

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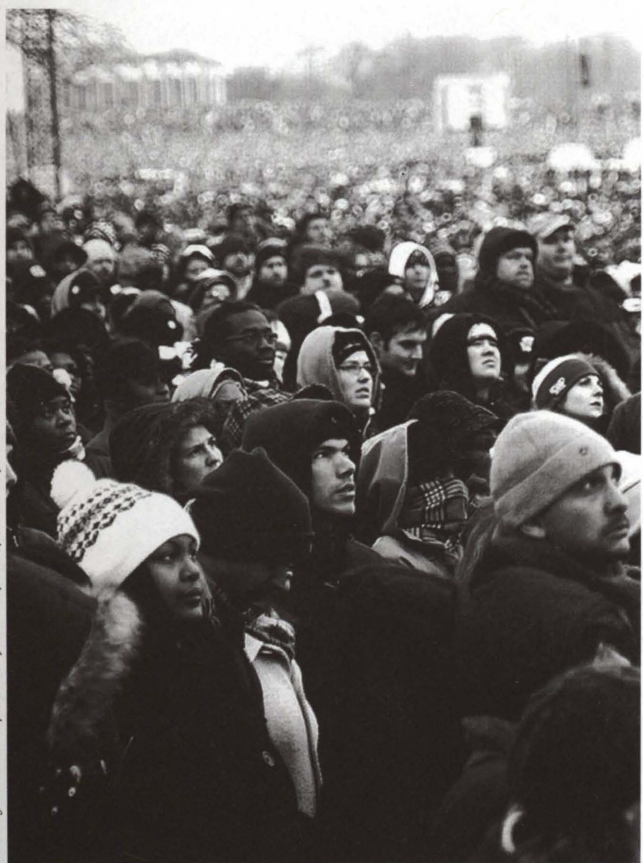
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Spectators at President Obama's inauguration in January 2009.

Alliance Building in Louisville

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tion, so her presence made the process of coming together for the formation of the Alliance easier."

Networks weave strong webs

In 35 years as a community-based multiracial organization taking quick action against specific instances of racist policies and practices, the Alliance has formed partnerships with other community groups, unions and churches. That informal network doesn't worry about who gets the credit, but just gets the word out for action.

Most of those other groups have a wide range of social concerns, but all of them value the Kentucky Alliance's concentration on issues of racist injustice. Increasingly those of us doing organizing work in Kentucky understand that injustice to one is injustice to all, and our battles must be fought together. These partner organizations appreciate our belief that none of the other issues of economic and social justice that are bars to a truly democratic society can be solved unless the racist policies that underlie our society and divide people are changed significantly.

The Alliance is also recognized as practically unique here in Louisville for the persistence of the true partnership between Blacks and whites. It is hard to remember any event sponsored by the Kentucky Alliance during its 35 years that has not had almost equal racial participation.

From board and committee meetings of five to fifteen people, to the annual Unity Dinners that draw 300 to 700 people each year, the mix hardly varies and usually approximates 60 to 40 percent Black to white in small planning groups, and 40 to 60 percent when all of Louisville is invited. Perhaps even more significant is the fact that the Alliance has consistently attracted

The basis for any real alliance is common need and mutual trust. Increasingly those of us doing organizing work in Kentucky understand that injustice to one is injustice to all, and our battles must be fought together.



Photo courtesy of K.A. Owens

K.A. Owens (center), a co-chair of the Kentucky Alliance, participates at the Alliance headquarters in "Cruising the Divide," the reading of a play about the divide between Black and white Louisville and the Black custom of "cruising" in automobiles on Kentucky Derby Day.

people across the deadly divides of class and economic security.

Making our path by walking

There has never been a policy manual to guide our efforts to overcome America's most threatening divisions. Probably more important than our con-

scious efforts at inclusion are the choices made about which battles to fight, our focus on action rather than talk and process and our willingness to take the conse-

quences of upsetting the politically and economically powerful. Our still-small ranks keep drawing recruits from those who dare to disturb and from those who suffer, need help and have little to lose.

Within the last few weeks, our organizational meeting to mount a campaign for public ownership of the local gas and electric utility got prominent notice in the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, and an article on current problems and opportunities in the public schools by our co-chairs was featured on its editorial page.

Our board currently reflects the community we serve by being majority African

American (fifteen members), with five white European Americans and two Latinos. Eight of the board members are women, and six are under 35 years old. Members are mostly poor and working class, with some modest middle-income, professional people.

Our objective is to build an anti-racist majority in our community. We think we have made progress as more white people join people of color in taking visible and vocal action against specific racist policies and practices. Our work and our public actions provide a pole to which others can gravitate when circumstances move them to action.

As longtime organizer Bob Cunningham says, "The basis for any real alliance is common need and mutual trust. I believe that the legacy set by the Kentucky Alliance remains here today."

Tom Moffett is a writer, historian and longtime Board member of the Kentucky Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, a RESIST grantee.

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Transformative Organizing at CALC

An Oregon-based peace and justice organization examines its roots and embraces new models

By Kori Rodley Irons

In a majority-white area of Oregon, there's an organization that is building connections and sharing power across race lines. Founded by a group of all-white clergy in 1966, the Community Alliance of Lane County (CALC) has since built a truly multiracial and diverse organization.

CALC set a guiding goal in the 1980s that has continued today—we would strive to be an authentically diverse group. For us this has meant seeking, recruiting and embracing not only involvement by people of color, but also leadership and participation at every level. While this might sound idyllic, it has not been easy; there have been stumbles and growing pains and some definite challenges.

As CALC continues to transition from a predominantly white peace group to a social justice organization with diverse leadership and membership, we work to address not just symptoms, but root causes of oppression. We struggle to work collaboratively as effective allies and to help build leadership, especially for marginalized people.



Michael Williams and Linda Hamilton serve as the two Board co-chairs of CALC, a longtime peace and justice organization based in Eugene, Oregon. CALC has made a commitment to transform from an all-white group to an authentically multiracial and diverse organization.

Long history of justice work

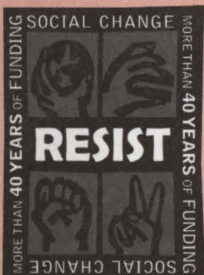
A grassroots nonprofit organization that has lasted nearly 45 years is rare, but one that has focused on challenging the status quo on some of the most difficult issues of the second half of the twentieth century is even more unique. CALC began in 1966 as a local chapter of a national

organization as Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV). In a matter of months, CALCAV had published an ad in our local newspaper expressing religious opposition to the war in Vietnam and was sending representatives to national actions in Wash-

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Hell Yes! Grant Awards

Recognizing inspiring, radical activism



To honor the moral clarity, courage and political commitment of its founders, RESIST created a new tribute grant in 2008: the **Hell Yes! Award**. This grant recognizes inspiring, radical activism that cuts to the heart of RESIST's mission to challenge illegitimate authority, with particular emphasis on anti-war and

anti-imperialist efforts. So far this year, RESIST has recognized four organizations with Hell Yes! awards.

A coalition of worker-based organizations whose members plant, harvest, process, pack, transport, prepare, serve and sell food, the **Food Chain Workers Alliance** organizes nationally to improve wages and working conditions for all workers along the food chain. Read more about their cutting-edge work at www.foodchainworkers.org.

EPOCA, Ex-Prisoners and Prisoners Organizing for Community Advancement, brings a broad analysis to their work in Worcester, Massachusetts to win policy changes and change the way power is held in their community. Visit www.exprisoners.org to learn more about their work, including their recent victory in the statewide battle around criminal records.

The **Cincinnati Interfaith Workers Center** works in Ohio to give low-income workers from all walks of life the opportunity to creatively challenge power relationships with their employers and improve their working terms and conditions. Find out more about their work for justice at www.cworkers.org.

Formed because the same chemical that killed and injured thousands in the 1984 Bhopal, India disaster was being produced at their neighborhood plant, **People Concerned About MIC** is a community organization in West Virginia dedicated to the protection of the health and safety of all in the vicinity of local chemical plants producing and storing highly toxic chemicals, including methyl isocyanate (MIC). Check out www.peopleconcernedaboutmic.com to read more about their work.

Transformative Organizing

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ington, DC, as well as hosting national antiwar leaders such as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Herschel and Rev. John Bennett.

From 1966 through the spring of 1975, the major focus of the organization was stopping the war on Vietnam and seeking amnesty for war resisters. The process of fighting against the war, however, created awareness among activists that the Vietnam War was a symptom of the horrors of war, aggression and militarism.

The 1970s became a time of organization and growth as the CALC Steering Committee adopted an annual budget of \$3,000 and hired Marion Malcolm as our first employee. The focus was on disarmament (including stopping the B-1 Bomber as part of the National Peace Conversion Campaign), the politics of food and an evolving interest in international human rights.

As the eighties dawned, CALC became involved with challenging US intervention in Central America and

organizing the first Oregon Witness for Peace delegation to Nicaragua.

This move into international human rights became a catalyst for a growing understanding of racism and privilege and for looking at power structures more intimately. Inspired by a young African American who was part of the national staff challenging the organization for focusing on human rights around the world while ignoring racism and human rights realities on the home front, the organization was shaken to become more authentic and relevant.

Transitions and growth

As CALC developed an understanding of institutional racism, we became involved in movements and causes that were part of the struggle. According to Marion Malcolm, CALC began to actively "support Native American struggles, immigrant rights' and farmworker struggles, and to ask why people of color were disproportionately poor or incarcerated."

This focus led us into other new areas for our peace and justice organization: serving on the school district's Racial Justice Task Force and initiating the Racism-Free Zone project. For over a decade, CALC also sponsored a Multicultural Kids' Peace Camp each summer.

Amidst this program work, the organization was also continuing to focus on diversity within the operations as well. For CALC, this has meant a constant diligence to ensure that heterosexism, anti-Semitism, immigrant rights, racism and other forms of social oppression are combated. The CALC board set a policy that the organization would have a diverse board make-up—this means that more than fifty percent of the board must be people of color and more than fifty percent must be women.

As part of staff, volunteer and board recruit-

Full stories and updated grantee news:
www.resistinc.org/news

ment, there is a constant consideration to make sure that diverse viewpoints are represented in terms of race, religious affiliation and sexual orientation. This concentrated effort has led the organization in becoming a unique force in campaigns against hate activity and homophobic political measures and defending immigrant rights, all the while continuing to challenge war and militarism.

Holding our own in the community

CALC's focus on multiracial organizing and challenging racism has not been without its struggles and challenges.

The city of Eugene, Oregon, and neighboring Springfield are predominantly white, although the area is becoming increasingly racially diverse. There is economic diversity, as well as growing diversity from the LGBTQ community.

There can be tensions in our non-traditional decision-making process. For an organization like CALC, this means that everyone involved commits to the growing pains, discomfort and occasional challenges that might arise from having so many diverse opinions and perspectives. Every volunteer, staff member and board member reads and signs a Memorandum of Understanding which states, in part:

Our intention is to respectfully and constructively discuss oppressive attitudes expressed by ourselves or others, and create awareness and openness to change through compassionate caring and honest dialogue.

Our board expects all CALC programs, staff and volunteers to be inclusive, to acknowledge privilege and to work against oppressive structures and behaviors.

CALC currently focuses on five main programs in our work. In Back-to-Back: Allies for Human Dignity, we work proactively and in response to bigotry, discrimination and hate through action, education and cultural means. We reach out to youth with accurate information about military service through Truth in Recruiting, and through Progressive Responses, we work toward cooperative and diplomatic international efforts for global peace and justice. Springfield

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CALC takes an active role in reaching out to queer youth, including with their Queer Youth Art Project at the annual Eugene Springfield Pride event. These two youth volunteered with the project.

Building Coalitions That Work

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10 years at a cost of \$60 billion annually, cutting military spending to finance the program. Now they are asking peace groups and others to join their efforts, thus opening up the possibility of a new kind of justice-and-peace coalition in the region.

One catalyst for this new movement has been the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic & Social Justice (SOC), a multiracial, multi-issue network of activists with headquarters in Birmingham, Alabama. [Editor's note: SOC moved to Atlanta in 1993 and disbanded in the mid-2000s.] SOC's work on the Gulf Coast grows out of an evolving concept of how to organize

a grassroots movement strong enough to change the nation's priorities, which its leaders hope can provide a model for other areas.

It actually all started in 1979, when SOC called a regional workshop in Birmingham to discuss links between the

nation's unmet human needs and peace. SOC began building local movements to counter the resurgent racism in the region—and realized that its goal of economic justice could never be realized as long as national resources were poured into weapons of destruction.

A new peace movement

One person who attended that pivotal 1979 workshop on human needs and peace in Birmingham was Pat Bryant, a young Black journalist from North

Carolina who worked in the 1960s and 1970s with tenant groups. He became convinced of the need to link local issues with national priorities.

Pat Bryant left his job as one of the editors of *Southern Exposure* to

become director of the new Southeast Project on Human Needs and Peace, co-sponsored by SOC and War Resisters League. The project's original strategy was to bring economic-survival groups together with traditional peace groups

"But we also know," says Pat Bryant, "that the basic problems of poor people cannot be solved until national priorities change from war to the meeting of human needs."

Transformative Organizing

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Alliance for Equity and Respect (SAfER) promotes human rights, including a night shelter, and works with schools so students are treated with dignity and respect.

Our commitment to diversity in terms of who is involved with CALC, how we

do business and the issues the organization focuses on is a reflection of our mission: to work for a society free of bigotry, upholding human rights and human dignity. That commitment also reflects CALC's understanding that progress towards social justice will not happen without leadership from groups that struggle against current social inequities and institutionalized forms of oppression.

CALC has made the claim that we are determined to include, involve and advocate for multiculturalism and antiracism, and this invites the community to be critical of our efforts. This high expectation encourages us to walk the talk. We

Read this article in its entirety online:
www.resistinc.org/newsletter

to form new local coalitions. Six target cities were selected, and Bryant spent a year traveling, contacting people, seeking to set such coalitions in motion.

There were some successes; tenuous coalitions were formed, for example between tenant groups and peace activists in Memphis. But none of the coalitions lasted.

"This is not the way to build a strong movement," Bryant told his coworkers in SOC. "It's the way people have usually tried to build coalitions, and it has usually failed. It's going at things backward."

Such work involved bridging tremendous chasms; most organized groups of poor people are Black; most existing peace organizations are white. Also, there is the barrier of class. Bryant maintained that coalitions of diverse groups are possible. But they must start, he said, with grassroots organizations that have developed their own strength to the point where they can provide leadership. Otherwise white middle-class groups become the central force and the needs of poor people get lost. Then the coalition falls apart—not

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work to not only be inclusive but to allow the direction of the organization to be influenced by the changing demographics of our community.

We have to be able to not only take the criticism, but to ingest that criticism and use it to help us stay on track and relevant. We give ourselves permission to call each other on privilege, racial issues and other realities of living in a racist society.

CALC is a model for other organizations. From an all-white clergy-led group, CALC has transformed into an organization that challenges institutional racism, that works as an effective ally organization and that shares power and resources.

Kori Rodley Irons is co-director of Administration and Development at CALC. In over 25 years of nonprofit management, her focus has been on activism, public relations and fund development for grassroots organizations. Kori and her partner are active in the local LGBTQ community and are enjoying an "empty nest" as their five children have launched themselves into the world.

Building Coalitions That Work

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because anybody gets mad and goes home, but because poor people lose interest.

So, in 1983, the Southeast Project began to concentrate on building strong grassroots bases. The tenant movement became the starting point.

With limited resources, Southeast Project strategists knew they could not work everywhere. They picked the Gulf Coast because by 1982 tenants there were organizing anew and requested the project's help. The thrust of the project has been leadership development, and the result has been the emergence of scores of new local leaders of the three-state area served by the project.

The project operates on the assumption that some important victories can be won now, things that will improve the lives of tenants, as has happened in Marrero.

"But we also know," Bryant says, "that the basic problems of poor people cannot be solved until national priorities change from war to the meeting of human needs. Local organizers are being dishonest if they don't tell people that, and we tell them."

Leaders of the Southeast Project constantly emphasize that they are not trying to recruit troops from among the poor for the peace movement that exists.

"That would never work," Bryant says. "We are trying to create a new peace movement—a peace-and-justice movement, led by poor people, mainly people of color, with the needs of the grassroots at its center. Tenants on the Gulf Coast are now asking people in peace organizations to join them."

This coalition-building is still in a beginning stage. At two regional workshops held in Alabama tenants from the Gulf Coast have provided leadership to gatherings of diverse people. In June 1985, tenants marching for better housing conditions in rural St. Charles Parish, Louisiana, called on New Orleans groups to support them, and there was considerable response.

"In Marrero, in St. Charles, in Gulfport, and elsewhere on the Gulf Coast," says Bryant, "we've taken a giant step toward our objective of building at the grassroots."

"Now we hope that more and more people in other organizations will join



Photo by Poverty Initiative, www.slack.com/photos/povertyinitiative

During the US Social Forum in June 2010, the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization organized a march to the headquarters of DTE Energy demanding the company stop shutoffs to low-income, disabled and senior residents.

the tenants to form a new coalition," he continues. "If they do, we'll have the kind of movement that can turn the country around. Not by ourselves in this one area, of course. But we hope we are creating an organizing model that will be replicated in many places."

The Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice is a former RESIST grantee, and Anne Braden, along with Reverend Ben Chavis, served as the organizations's first co-chair.

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Inside this issue:
Multiracial movement building
and coalitions that work



Meet RESIST

GRANT RECIPIENTS

RESIST awards grants six times a year to groups throughout the United States engaged in organizing for social, economic and environmental justice. In this issue of the Newsletter we list a few grant recipients from our most recent allocation cycle in August of 2010. For more information, visit the RESIST website at www.resistinc.org or contact the groups directly.

Neighbor to Neighbor-Lynn
112 Exchange Street, Lynn,
Massachusetts 01901. www.n2nma.org

A progressive organization of working class, multiracial and multi-ethnic people working together to build political and economic power, Neighbor to Neighbor is governed by its grassroots membership. The Lynn chapter joined with all state chapters in celebrating their recent victory in a long battle to reform the state's criminal record system. Massachusetts is now the second state to prohibit employers from asking about a person's criminal history on an initial job application.

A RESIST grant of \$3,000 will help Neighbor to Neighbor-Lynn continue to build effective grassroots coalitions.

BAY-Peace: Better Alternatives for Youth

6422 Irwin Court, Oakland,
California 94609. www.baypeace.org

BAY-Peace is an organization that focuses on fighting back against aggressive military recruiting in local schools. They provide workshops and trainings to give young people information about the military that recruiters wouldn't want them to know. They are reaching out to youth all over the Bay Area to organize for better alternatives.

RESIST's grant of \$3,000 will allow BAY-Peace to continue to engage in critical counter-recruitment and youth organizing work in California.

Power in Community Alliances

170 Park Street, Bangor, Maine
04401. www.pica.ws

The work of Power in Community Alliances (PICA) has helped to make Maine a state leader in addressing the effects of the global economy on the lives of Maine residents. For nearly 25 years PICA has been building grassroots com-

munity alliances that address global problems of economic justice and human and worker rights.

RESIST's grant of \$3,000 will help PICA continue programs like "kNow US AND THEM," built on a Listening Project of in-depth interviews of recent economic immigrants, small farmers and displaced manufacturing workers in Maine.

Interfaith Alliance of Idaho

PO Box 15893, Boise, Idaho 83715.
www.tiaidaho.org

Founded in 1998 to challenge the radical religious right, the Interfaith Alliance of Idaho promotes the positive and healing role of religion in public life by encouraging civic participation, facilitating community activism and challenging religious political extremism.

RESIST awarded the Interfaith Alliance of Idaho a grant of \$3,000 to continue to work with groups across the state to develop local coalitions that will place progressives in local government at all levels and encourage community organizing as the tool to accomplish our goals.